John Kurtz Made Victoria Cigars Famous

By JAMES K. NESBITT

IT'S DIFFICULT to believe now, but in the 1880s made-in-Victoria cigars were looked upon as among the finest that could be bought.

They were exported to California and, in San Francisco, which had its own cigar manufacturers, they were said to be as fine, if not finer, than those made in the city by the Golden Gate.

Victoria was fiercely loyal to its own cigars, and they were always a feature of the elaborate banquets that made life in Victoria in the 1880's so gay and bright and cosmopolitan.

An American named John Kurtz seems to have been the father of Victoria's cigar industry. He proved it could be done.

In January of 1881 he started a cigar factory here, and The Colonist ran an article on tobacco: "The herbaceous plant called tobacco, a word of uncertain derivation, is a native of the New World, where it has been used by American and Canadian Indians from time immemorial. Columbus found it in extensive use on the continent of which he was the discoverer in the last years of the 15th century.

"Although smoking was practised in Shakespeare's time, yet no mention of the habit occurs in his works; yet that immortal poet must have been aware of the growing popularity of the habit, from the fact Sir Walter Raleigh, a confirmed smoker, being his contemporary.

"Fulminations against the weed in the early part of the 17th century from very high quarters were neither few nor far between. Popes, sultans and kings thundered out their anathemas and counterblasts against it. Smoking was a great crime and at one point was punishable by death on the continent of Europe.

"James I of England described it as 'a custom loathsome to the eye, hateful to the lungs, and in the black, stinking fume thereof nearest resembling the horrible Stygian smoke of the pit that is bottomless."

NEW VENTURE

Then came the announcement of the new venture in Victoria: "In no part of the world is there more tobacco consumed in various forms, per capita, than in this province. Such being the case every British Columbian, whether partial to the weed or not, will wish our enterprising townsman—John Kurtz—the greatest possible success in his new enterprise of manufacturing cigars. For 20 years hundreds of thousands annually used in this province were imported from abroad, but now almost every man is loud in praise of 'Kurtz' Own.' "

The entire upper flat of the Dominion Building, on the corner of Government and Trounce Alley was occupied in the production of fragrant Havanas. One room was used for stripping and cleaning the leaves, drying and packing them in cases for further use. As they became ready they went to the manufacturing room—here a number of youths were engaged in stemming and stripping.

Refuse material was of value for making sheep dip and insect control.

"The prepared leaves now pass into the hands of the makers. These men sit at low tables, their chief tools being their own nimble fingers, a knife and a little paste. The last room of the suite is used for storage, where row upon row of cigars—greet the eye and gratify the connoisseurs."

John Kurtz tried to encourage tobacco growing in this area, but to no avail.

"Leaf tobacco," said The Colonist, "pronounced by Mr. Kurtz of the cigar factory to be of excellent quality for plug purposes, has been produced on McMillan's farm, South Saanich, from Kentucky seed. He raised 50 to 60 pounds of the weed, but as there is no manufactory of plug tobacco in the province it is not saleable. Why should he not try the capacity of the soil and climate for cigar tobacco?"

By 1883 Kurtz made an addition to his factory at Trounce and Government with a new storage wing. "The object of keeping such a large stock of cigars is so that they may be properly seasoned before being placed on the market."

The next year the Kurtz factory was booming so that some competition seemed warranted.

"Tietjen and Levy are . . . a new cigar manufacturing firm. They occupy part of the building formerly used by The Colonist, near the post office. They employ at present 25 hands and pay out in wages weekly $300. They manufacture 16,000 cigars weekly and find a ready market in the city. Their prices range from $35 to $130 per thousand."

"Oh Hong's factory on Fisgard Street, gives employment to 20 Chinese, who receive $100 a week in wages."

But the Kurtz factory remained tops: "In few branches of business has the increase been so marked as the demand for good cigars. According to population British Columbians are undoubtedly the heaviest smokers in the Dominion. The Kurtz factory gives employment to 65 hands—turns out 43,000 cigars a week."

John Kurtz was one of those early-day citizens who could never overcome the restlessness that was in him. He wanted to be constantly on the go—and so he spent his years between Victoria and the upper Fraser River, then back to Victoria, then to California for a spell and back to Victoria and away again.

In December of 1860 we read of him in Yale:

"Mr. John Kurtz, late a resident of Fort Yale, British Columbia, was yesterday presented with an elegant gold watch on behalf of the citizens of that flourishing town, as a tribute of esteem for his many good qualities.

"Mr. Kurtz first went to Yale in 1858 and has ever since been one of its most enterprising merchants and public spirited citizens. He has also contributed largely to the columns of The Colonist over the signature of Jonah, and is a witty and ready writer.

"Tomorrow's steamer will bear him from our midst, and we sincerely wish him a speedy return. We have plenty of room in our country for many more men of the same stamp; and we can ill afford to lose a citizen so universally respected and esteemed. He has our warmest wishes for success in every undertaking in which he may engage. The watch is at present in the keeping of E. Marks, jeweler, Yates Street."

Where is this watch now? What a priceless historic treasure! Probably sold in a junk store years ago!

And so it was with John Kurtz for many years. He had a wife and family, but they could never keep up with him, and so they remained in California.

He died in Victoria in September of 1891, and The Colonist ran a long account of his life, which reads like fiction.

John Kurtz, left, and cronies, including George Steitz and Robert Ridley, outside the Victoria cigar factory. Today no one can identify the little boys who got into the picture.

Pioneer Built Mining Fortune

"A pioneer of the pioneers, John Kurtz, one of the veterans of the Pacific coast, and the friend of all who enjoyed the pleasure of knowing him, departed a busy, useful and adventurous life in Jubilee Hospital . . .

"While Mr. Kurtz had aged much during the past few years and was growing noticeably feebler each month, few suspected that the dissolution was so close at hand; the news of his death comes as a sudden and personal bereavement to hundreds in this province, of whose resources he was so proud, and so worthy an advocate . . .

"Public spirited to a degree, his name will ever remain associated with those who gave life, energy, everything they possessed, to the upbuilding of British Columbia.

"The late pioneer was born, of German parentage, in Philadelphia, 59 years ago. He received a liberal education in his native city where he started life as a druggist's appentice, and in 1849 made his way to California, then just beginning to come before the world as a country of glorious possibilities. In the infant city of San Francisco Mr. Kurtz embarked in the tobacco business, in partnership with a man named Drinkhouse. The business was a profitable one and the young Philadelphian soon became recognized as a leader in every movement for the public good. He was one of the organizers of the California State Militia, in which he held the rank of captain, and also of the San Francisco fire department. He was a member, and an outspoken one, of the vigilance committee of 1856 which hanged and drove out the gamblers and roughs who had usurped the civic government, and cleaned San Francisco of as desperate a collection of thieves and cutthroats as ever were found in one locality."

And now John Kurtz reaches British Columbia:

"In 1858 when the great wave of miners and prospectors swept up the Fraser to Yale, Mr. Kurtz was one of the company . . . For a time the deceased had for a partner at Yale Hugh Nelson, another pioneer merchant, and now lieutenant - governor of the province.

FORTUNE FROM CARIBOO

"In 1861 Mr. Kurtz was instrumental in organizing, and became secretary of the Yale Steamboat Company, which built the Fort Yale in Victoria harbor, and established a regular service up the Fraser River to Yale, when Hope had previously been recognized as the head of steam navigation.

"In 1862 the deceased again made California his home, but only for a few months, Cariboo next claiming his attention. He was the owner of the famous 'Point' claim on Williams Creek, in which he made a large sum of money. With this fortune he once more returned to California, but the spirit of adventure was strong in him and he next came prominently before British Columbians as the organizer of the Lane and Kurtz mining company.

"From Cariboo Mr. Kurtz went to the Nevada River region, then an unknown land, and where he at one time was the owner of mining property worth several millions.

"A keen and energetic student, deceased was possessed of a wide and liberal education, which rendered most valuable his many contributions to the press of California and of British Columbia. In science he was also at home, and few were better informed upon all subjects connected with botany and mineralogy. He remained an American citizen until his death. While a Mason, in good standing, he chose to maintain his connection with Pioneer Lodge of San Francisco. Deceased leaves a widow, one son and three daughters, all resident in California."

John Kurtz was buried in Victoria.

"The late John Kurtz was interred at Ross Bay Cemetery with all the honors that the friends of his early and later years could bestow upon him.

"The body, in a beautiful walnut casket, was laid out in the room of the Pioneer Society and was viewed with evident sorrow by many a venerable old-timer, as well as by friends and associates of later day. On the breast of the deceased was his pioneer's medal, which for years he wore with such pride, and at the foot of the coffin was a beautifully worked floral cross placed there as a mark of esteem and regards from Lieutenant-Governor and Mrs. Nelson.

"Many ladies passed into the room to take a last look at the deceased before the casket was covered. Previous to the removal of the casket the employees of the cigar factory stood round the remains of their beloved employer and were photographed."

"The casket was then removed, the pallbearers being Hon. Theodore Davie, Hon. D. W. Higgins, Capt. Gowen, J. B. Lovell, W. Humphrey, Joseph Loewen, E. C. Johnson and Morris Moss.

"The remains were then taken to Christ Church Cathedral where the solemn and impressive service of the Church of England was read by the Rev. H. Kingham. The cortege then moved on to the cemetery, where another photograph was taken. The funeral procession was a very long one, no less than 50 carriages following the hearse, while hundreds of friends of the deceased accompanied the body to its last earthly resting place."